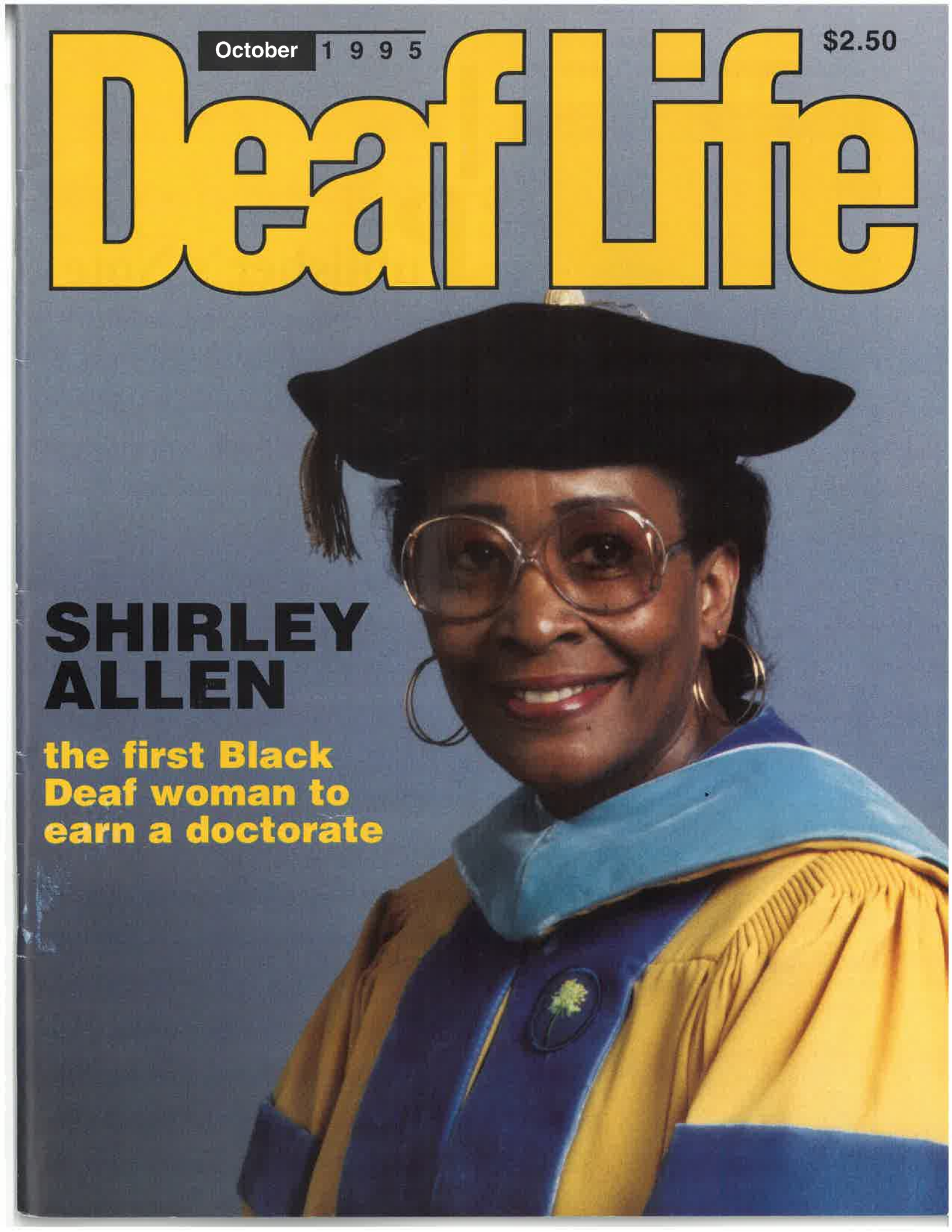
October 1995

Deaf Life

$2.50



SHIRLEY ALLEN

the first Black Deaf woman to earn a doctorate

VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 4 OCTOBER 1995

COVER

DESIGN BY MATTHEW S. MOORE
PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. SHIRLEY ALLEN

IN 1962, AT AGE 20, WHILE preparing for a career as a concert pianist, Shirley Allen was deafened by a severe illness that nearly killed her. Thirty years later, she received her Doctorate of Education in Counseling from University of Rochester (New York). She is believed to be the first Black Deaf woman in the United States to earn a doctorate. (Her dissertation focused on parents' attitudes and knowledge and other factors influencing their deaf children's aspirations and career choices.) A veteran teacher (she's worked at NTID for 22 years), she talks about her life, family, vocation, students, her challenges, and her dreams. 10

Publisher's Note

Shirley Allen, the subject of this month's cover story, is the first Black deaf woman to earn a Ph.D. She is a late-deafened adult, a teacher who has studied and written about black deaf people. And she's the first Black woman to appear on the cover of **DEAF LIFE**.

It goes without saying that it's tough to be black, deaf, and female. Being late-deafened is, in some ways, even tougher.

I salute the efforts of the Black Deaf women who are fighting for better educational and job opportunities, and who are entering and establishing themselves in nontraditional as well as traditional professions. They have, for example, been taking high-ranking posts in state agencies serving the Deaf community, participating on juries, teaching, counseling, and inspiring deaf students, performing and acting, writing, and advocating. We have publicized their achievements in **DEAF LIFE** Plus—it's not as though we've suddenly "discovered" Black Deaf women!—and will continue to do so.

We at **DEAF LIFE** are doing our best to find—and publicize—Black Deaf achievers. As with other groups of deaf people (Hispanic, Gay/Lesbian, Jewish, Asian-Pacific, etc.), deaf African-Americans are part of our community. Even so, they are a diverse group. Some identify themselves as Deaf first; others as African-Americans first. We'll be doing future stories focusing on the Black Deaf community, of course.

Matthew S. Moore

DR. SHIRLEY ALLEN

"My students are, first and foremost, the love of my life"

On a chilly Sunday morning, May 24, 1992, the University of Rochester held its annual commencement ceremonies. More than 2,500 persons graduated from UR that day, including about 350 who received doctorates. Among them was Shirley Allen, the first Black Deaf woman to do so.

Her family was there, cheering for her, "even though she couldn't hear them." Her 92-year old grandmother, Cashie Allen, was there too, braving the cold. She had flown in from Texas—her first plane trip. The Rochester **Democrat and Chronicle**, which reported the event ("University of Rochester Grad Downplays Her Victory/She overcame disability to earn her doctorate"), quoted her: "I said, 'Lord, I can't miss this opportunity, it won't come again.'" Shirley Allen herself quoted the concluding lines of William Ernest Henley's familiar poem, "Invictus": "I am the master of my fate,/I am the captain of my soul."

Shirley Jeanne Allen was born in 1941, and grew up in Nacogdoches, East Texas. After she graduated from E.J. Campbell High School in 1959, she and her family moved south to La Marque, just north of Galveston.

She says: "Nacogdoches was a small town like most other small towns in the Southern states. (It had about 11,000 people while I was growing up.) It is the oldest town in Texas. (I learned this fact in graduate school at Howard University while researching my town for a term paper.) Like many young people, I couldn't wait to leave the place. Today, I wish the whole world could see it—simply a beautiful place. Recently, I visited there and had the opportunity to look at and observe all the beauty which one ignores in hometowns while growing up.

"In Nacogdoches, everyone knew just about everyone else. It was a segregated town in almost every sense of the word—no mixing (legally), though from the looks of some of my schoolmates, this wasn't entirely true. I lived a couple of blocks from the downtown shopping area (Main Street), which was several miles from predominantly Black areas. On the street where I lived, Blacks lived in one section and whites in the other (across the tracks). I went 'across the creek' to visit and play with my Black friends. Although I think I lived closer to the white school (I don't even remember), I wasn't allowed to go there. So... I attended an all-Black school which was also located 'across the creek.' High school was a great experience for me. It was segregated, [too]." She was valedictorian of her class.

"I cannot recall ever thinking about

attending school, churches, movie theaters, or even the County Fair with white people (the county allowed blacks to go to the fair one special day). The best movie in town was opened to Blacks in 1958 and we had to sit in the balcony. This was great fun!

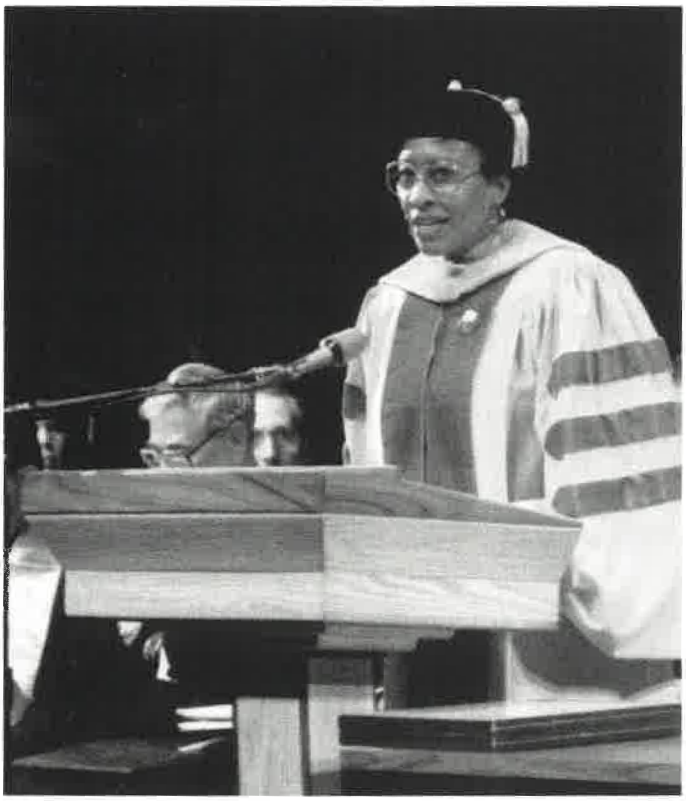
"I've lived with a mother, father, grandmother, aunts, cousins, great aunts, and a stepmother. Because of the different personalities which make up these people, I feel that this has given me an opportunity to understand what goes on in the minds of others, what makes people think the way they do and why, and observe the various modes of responses which occur in different situations. Perhaps, though I'm not sure, this is basically what encouraged me to major in counseling.

"Music was always my first love. I seemed to have had a rare gift for music. Maybe not rare, but it was certainly a gift. I have never been able to explain exactly how I learned new piano 'pieces' or remembered the old ones, but I did. And I knew how all of them sounded. At that time, I could even hum the melodies."

In 1962, Shirley Allen was a 20-year-old junior at Jarvis Christian College majoring in Music Education (emphasis on piano). "I took music lessons with seniors because I began my major as a freshman." After developing "some kind of fever," she was given medication, then lapsed into a coma for several weeks. After regaining consciousness, she found that she was deaf. ("I lost my hearing as a result of medication given for the fever.")

For a young adult who loses her hearing suddenly, feelings of depression, denial, bewilder-

"My 8th-grade graduation photo. I graduated valedictorian from both the 8th and 12th grades."



Reciting an original poem, "Brick City," at NTID's 25th Anniversary Convocation (November 12, 1993).

ment, and rage are normal reactions. Looking back, Dr. Allen says, "I think I probably experienced all of the feelings that most or all late-deafened adults experience. I've always been somewhat gregarious° and have an accepting attitude. So I felt that whatever happened, happened. There's no turning back, no changing a permanent situation. I must admit that I did wait, for a month or so, for my hearing to return. The doctors in the hospital said that when the medication wore off, chances were that my hearing would return. After a specialist informed me that this was not so, I then decided to do whatever I could to make life livable. At that time, that meant being with my old friends, going to summer parties, and trying to figure out whatever the future held. I did not know, until years later, that I was devastated, at some point. By that time, I suppose it was too late to be openly pitiful (sometimes I'm a bit slow!). My support system was my family, especially my grandmother, who is the strongest Black woman in the world. Members of my immediate and extended families have all experienced adversity° in one way or another. None of them gave in to it, as far as I know. People expected me to confront this deafness thing, look into its eyes, and go on. Expectations have a profound effect on some people.

"[But after] I lost my hearing, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I returned to college one year later and completed requirements in the music department." She gave her senior music recital. "However, since I had only been in school for three years, I lacked credits to graduate. Instead of trying to become a concert pianist who happened to be deaf, I decided to try something else. This decision led me to Gallaudet College in 1963, the year in which I had previously planned to graduate with a degree in Music Education."

After attending Gallaudet for two-and-a-half years and graduating in 1966 with a B.A. in English, she had to make "another huge decision. I had a choice of going to graduate school or going to work full-time. I chose working because I felt I had used up my time in school and there was a desire to test my independence; to see how I could fare away from family and structured academics.

"Between October, 1965 and September, 1967, I worked as a Classification Clerk for the Peace

Two pioneers. Dr. Allen and Dr. Glenn B. Anderson, the first African-American Deaf man to earn a Ph.D. The first Black Deaf member of the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees, he's now Chairman.

Corps home office, a technical editor for the Internal Revenue home office, and a distribution clerk for the post office—all in Washington, D.C. I was asked to work in the Gallaudet dormitories as a supervisor (house parent, RA, etc.) and worked there for 6 years. During this time, I also taught classes in English and Literature, attended and graduated from Howard University [in 1972] with a Master's in Guidance and Counseling." Her thesis: "What Factors Are Considered in the Selection of Vocational Choices by Persons With Differing Degrees of Hearing Ability." "The following year, I went to work as a Developmental Education Specialist at NTID/RIT in Rochester, New York."

Abandoning a promising career in music did bother her, but becoming a teacher was almost an automatic "substitute choice" since her father, aunts, uncles, and a grandmother were all teachers.

Now an Associate Professor in RIT's Department of Liberal Arts, Dr. Allen has taught at NTID since 1973. "I have worked at NTID for 22 years; I have also earned a doctorate [Ed.D.] in Counseling." She did her doctoral studies at UR because NTID doesn't have a doctoral program. Her dissertation was titled "The Relationship of Deaf Adolescents' Career Choices and Their Perception of Parental Attitudes Toward Their Competence as Deaf Individuals."

"Although both [my] degrees are in Counseling, I have never worked officially as a counselor. I feel that teaching gives me freedom to associate and be in contact with my students more closely than if I were a counselor. This freedom includes the choice of using my counseling, as well as my instructional skills.

"My students are, first and foremost, the love of my life. Of course, they don't know this until years after they leave my class. I do not consider them my friends. What I enjoy most about teaching is, when that rare feeling comes, telling me that I have helped someone and that they appreciate this new knowledge. What I like least? There are two things that are probably equal: The students do not always do their best and the quarterly system is too short (in comparing it with semesters)."

Dr. Allen has received a variety of honors and awards, and has been a guest and keynote speaker at numerous conferences and African-American/Back Deaf heritage-and-history celebrations. "I probably enjoyed the one in Houston for *Inroads* [the most] because I was on home territory and many in the audience knew a lot about those experiences. Also, that was the first time my parents heard me deliver a major speech." She's listed in **Notable Americans** (1978), **Who's Who of American Women** (1984), **Personalities of America** (1984), and **Who's Who Among Black Americans** (1994-95).

In 1992, she told the **Democrat and Chronicle**: "Deafness is now a part of me. I'm not sure I have

accepted it, but I don't think it's so important that I have to worry about it." Although she said she misses the music, she tapped her forehead and said, "I can hear it—up here. It's always up here. I've got 20 years of music right up here. People tell me, 'You're lucky. Most of the music today is bad anyway.'"

As with many late-deafened people, Dr. Allen has continued to use her voice. She also signs. "I would not call myself a 'skilled' signer. I am most comfortable speaking, so I usually use total communication. In the meantime, I have been signing for 32 years, so that's longer than I could hear. I don't think that I sign much better than I did 30 years ago, but this is my mode of communication in the classroom and elsewhere and I have been evaluated from both spectrums—some folks think I sign well and others do not. I'm comfortable enough with it and my students have never complained."

Shirley Allen made history when she became the first African-American deaf woman to earn a doctorate. Has she, by example, inspired others to do likewise? "Seeing is believing, and I have been told numerous times that I encouraged a black young lady who saw me and or 'heard' me. This is all well and good, but something must happen after that. I do know that the Admissions Department at NTID is doing everything in their power to try to recruit more minority (I hate that word!) students. The manager of this area is a Black deaf woman and you can be sure that she is trying with everything that she has."

Thinking about the unexpected course her life has taken, she says: "I feel good about my achievement. In the beginning, I didn't know what I felt or what I was suppose to feel, so it was somewhat embarrassing sometimes—when people seemed to make a big deal of it. I'm still learning how to appreciate myself, in general, and although I've known all my life that I am special in some way—someday, perhaps, I'll know how special and why. What I don't feel is that I am better than someone who finished the eighth grade and produced three children with Master's degrees (this

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

NEW LOOK!
Ultratec's Superprint 4425™
More TTYs and Assistive Devices than can fit under one roof!
Now with even more assistive devices and Ultratec TTYs to choose from!
• Ultratec TTYs
• FM listening systems
• clock timers
• phone amplifiers
• television decoders
• signalers for doorbell & phone
• audio/visual smoke detectors
• and much, much more!
CALL TODAY FOR A FREE CATALOG
1-800-433-2838 (V/TTY)
Potomac Technology
Everything you need under one roof!
Please send me a FREE catalog:
Name:
Address:
City:
State: Zip:
Potomac Technology
One Church Street, Suite 402 • Rockville, MD 20850-4158
(301) 762-0851 (TTY) • (301) 762-4005 (V/TTY)

example is of my grandmother); or anyone else who has experienced the feeling of what they believe is a great accomplishment. Education is a great achievement, but one has to be humble—I know too many people who didn't finish grade school, who have accomplished greater things than an academic degree. Being able to give, without expecting anything in return, is a great accomplishment. Having a good character and values are great accomplishments. Being able to love with all one's heart and soul is a great accomplishment. I like to think that one works for everything that one receives. Through working hard, we tend to accomplish things. I hope that someone will be encouraged through my persistence.° Until there are others, there doesn't seem much of an achievement. An achievement is worthwhile only when shared. If it encourages someone else to do something, then that's great.

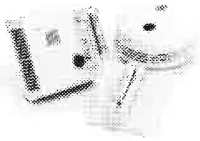
"The reason for my success as a person is my family—it's in the genes. I continued through school because of a couple of graduate-school professors and two friends who had faith in me. In my speeches and discussions, I try to inform students that being smart and ambitious is not the only way to achieve. One has to have goals and reasons for achieving (I don't really believe that it matters what these are). I don't think of myself as being a person who loves school and I like to share this with students. So many of them 'drop out' because they don't like school. I believe that one has to have some understanding of what one wants in life—then go for it. Going to school was the only way I could get where I wanted to go.

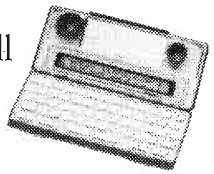
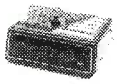
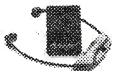
"My biggest challenge has been believing in myself. I'm sure many will find this hard to believe, but it's true. The self-confidence has been a long time coming. What helps me most is, I'm quite good at boosting others' confidence and trying to encourage self-esteem (especially within my students). As I watch them grow, I grow with them. I'm still learning to listen to my heart."■

gregarious: sociable; enjoying company.
adversity: hardship; misfortune; bad luck.
persistence: endurance; not giving up.

Now with New TTYs from Ultratec

Your Single Source for Assistive Devices

Weitbrecht Communications  offers the widest variety of TTYs and assistive devices available.

Ultratec's Superprint 4425™
We help you select all  the options that are best for you!
Choose from our complete line of Ultratec TTYs, or from our large selection of assistive devices including telephone amplifiers, alarm/wake-up  clocks, alerting systems,  listening devices, signalers, decoders, and more!

Call today for a **FREE CATALOG** 1-800-233-9130 (V/TTY)

WEITBRECHT COMMUNICATIONS, INC.
2656 29th Street, Suite 205, Santa Monica, CA 90405, (310) 452-8613 (V), (310) 452-5460 (TTY)